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ABSTRACT

This paper is designed to pinpoint the problems facing the teaching of foreign languages and suggests strategies that can be used in meeting these problems. The problems facing the profession have been assessed by observing foreign language teachers in the classroom and in conversations with them. Problems include the varying rate at which students acquire language skills, course content, preparation of students before they enter a given course, student attitudes toward language study, and the relationship between language study and their chosen careers. The strategies incorporate the findings of recent research and innovative ideas in foreign language curriculum development. (Author/CLK)

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STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING THE TEACHING and LEARNING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING THE TEACHING and LEARNING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

BACKGROUND

In the past twenty years interest in foreign languages has waxed and waned and methodologies have come and gone. Currently there is cause for concern as some school districts are eliminating foreign languages at the junior high level and dropping languages with low enrollments. This shift in emphasis has disturbed foreign language teachers who have seen great sums of federal money expended in National Defense Institute programs, in research and in foreign language materials only to see the effects of that effort waning. Teacher consternation has resulted from the current low priority of languages in the curriculum and from the fact that highly regarded foreign language methodologies have not lived up to their promises. In addition, recurring trends in foreign language teaching have left many experienced teachers with a sense of deja vu and suspicious of current foreign language theory that appears to be yesterday's ideas clothed in "mod style." The result has been healthy in some respects in that many foreign language teachers have adopted an ecclectic approach and have selected teaching techniques that through experience have proven effective to them. Unfortunately, however, this attitude has caused some to revert to methodologies that the National Defense

Institutes tried to eliminate. Others have drawn a line on potential foreign language program innovations by accepting the notion that there can be nothing new in foreign language teaching. The latter position is indeed a dangerous one to adopt at a time when the profession finds itself in a state of flux and attempts to find new solutions to some new and some persistent problems. We can only begin to move toward solutions if we can isolate what has been learned from experience and pinpoint the issues facing us.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

. No one text or method exists that will effectively teach all students. The ability to learn visually or auditorily will vary among students; some will tolerate the repetition of pattern practices better than others. To meet different learning styles, methods must vary as must activities.

. Along with differing abilities and motivation, students have differing expectations from their foreign language experience. This should cause teachers to clarify their goals and realize that there can be several goals for foreign language learning.

. The most successful foreign language teacher is the one who is able to interact positively with students and has learned the wisdom of adaptibility. There is no better example of this than Latin teachers who have been able to save their program in spite of the cries of "irrelevant subject" purely on the strength of their personality and effective teaching.

. It is impossible to go on with the notion that a student is something to be programmed for language. Viewing the student as

a receptacle into which language is poured, which has been the trend in recent years, can only alienate those students who seek to establish rapport with teachers and expect to find humanistic value in their foreign language work.

. Teachers will have to strive to make foreign language courses more appealing in order to maintain and attract students. Early graduation, alternative education, career education, and possible further erosion of the foreign language requirement at the university languages level, will necessitate that foreign languages have better holding capabilities. Teachers will be required to do more active recruiting and make their courses more attractive while changing their focus from dealing with a captive audience.

. The foreign language profession today is made up of extremely well prepared and capable teachers; perhaps more now than at any time. However, the situation demands that each teacher devote more time and effort to convincing students, administrators, and the public of the importance of foreign languages in the educational scheme of things. In addition, it is important that they band together in professional organizations to share ideas and the fruits of their imagination in order to strengthen their position.

PRESENT REALITIES FACING FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS

Today's educational climate allows students to exercise more freedom of choice in educational programs that provide them with more options. In addition, they can express their expectations and concerns regarding school subjects more than previously. Today's

students express concern for the "relevancy" of foreign languages in their lives and these increasingly pragmatic students question how foreign languages can help them in their life work. Surveys indicate that students have three basic expectations from their foreign language study: (1) to speak it, (2) to learn about the culture, (3) to use it to further their careers. In addition to responding to these concerns and expectations, foreign language teachers must also face both new and old problems such as,

. How do we reduce the number of students who drop the foreign language after the second year, a practice that is both inefficient and ineffective?

. If most students are to remain in our program for only two years, how can we make this a profitable experience in terms of subject matter learned and attitudes changed? Basically, how can we avoid promulgating the situation of creating disgruntled and disappointed students who later come to positions of authority and discredit foreign language study?

. How do we improve the situation in which students seldom attain a measure of satisfaction, success, or a sense of progress from their foreign language experience because tney achieve at only 50% or 60% proficiency?

. How can we improve the situation in which students after three or four years of high school language instruction place only in the first semester of their college level courses?

. How do we demonstrate to the student, the administrators and the parents that foreign language learning increases knowledge of one's own language, increases understanding among people and is "good" for the student?

. How do we restore to foreign languages their importance in the curriculum?

. How do we fulfill student expectations that foreign languages be career-useful and life-meaning?

. How do we overcome the domino effect caused by the dropping of the foreign language requirement by institutions of higher learning?

. How do we make foreign languages accessible to all and allow as many students as possible to be successful in the foreign language?

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

To pretend that a panacea has been found for the previously mentioned problems would be deceiving. However, it is unwise not to attempt to approach solutions through certain innovative practices and redesign of existing programs. The following strategies, some of which have already been incorporated in some school districts, are aimed at improving foreign language programs by aiding administrators in scheduling and redesigning the foreign language program, guidance counselors in advising, and foreign language teachers in preparing curriculum.

Problem:

The major problem facing students in learning a foreign language is that within a given class all are expected to master subject matter at the same rate and by the same method. This is a practice that violates all we know about primary and secondary language

learning because individuals acquire language at different rates and in different ways. The result is that many students do not master foundation material and struggle along during their foreign language study at 50% or 60% proficiency. Consequently, they seldom attain the sense of satisfaction that accomplishment brings and looksfor a quick exit from their foreign language study.

Strategy:

Much has been written for and against individualized instruction in foreign languages and other disciplines. A practical approach to the method is still in the future due to a lack of appropriate materials, teacher acceptability, and student motivation. In the absence of individualized instruction, efforts should be made to decentralize instruction in the classroom by grouping students according to their progress and skills attainment in the foreign language. Teachers of language arts have long realized that language skills are more effectively taught by grouping students according to skills mastered. Since the success of grouping depends on having adequate staff, second, third, and fourth year or advanced placement students can lead individual groups. Compensation for their work can be in the form of partial credit. Peer teachers are to be selected according to maturity, knowledge of subject and willingness to teach and must be given a preparation in foreign language teaching techniques in a workshop prior to assuming their duties. The success of this method depends on teachers formulating clear goals, constructing accurate diagnostic tests, and maintaining complete records of student achievements.

Problem:

Very few options are provided students of foreign languages beyond the first two years of audio-lingual courses and the subsequent readings and literature courses. As a result, some students have little motivation to continue foreign language study.

Strategy:

Options can be increased, many within the established schedule, to allow students to select foreign languages more in line with their abilities and interests. For example:

. Level A and B courses for the less able student with a focus on oral work and culture. Conversational situations are based on everyday life occurrences and human interactions in the student's immediate environment. Interdisciplinary cooperation with industrial arts, agriculture, trades, and business is maintained as students learn vocabulary related to their work interests. At the same time the students receive a thorough exposure to the culture of the target language.

. For students in central and southern Delaware, who expect to follow an agricultural career, a useful course is one in conversational Spanish with emphasis on the vocabulary of the farm and study of the culture of the Mexican-American and Puerto Rican migrant worker. The course is not only practical but can also lead to better understanding of the migrant worker's situation.

. Mini courses on the history, life styles, art and literature taught in the target language.

. An abnormally high attrition after the level B course and between junior and senior high school, an increased variety of

courses for student selection at the senior year level, plus a trend toward alternative education and accelerated graduation, demand that C, D, E, foreign language courses be more diverse and attractive. The practice has been to lead students who have completed the B level course to the study of literature. Although it is a highly desirable goal, not all students are willing to devote the time or effort necessary to decode literary texts, nor do all students have the level of maturity or experience necessary to appreciate many literary works. C, D, E level courses should provide students with the opportunity of taking 1/2, 3/4 or a full credit by selecting the component(s) of the course they desire. Also, a C, D, or E course should include enough variations so that students who do not have sufficient time to include foreign languages in their schedule after the B course could elect components of those courses to maintain their foreign language skills until college. Some components are:

Grammar and composition
Peer teaching
Advanced conversation
Readings and discussions
History of the target country taught in the target language
Culture of the target country taught in the target language

For a student who will engage in peer teaching the following schedule could be followed:

Grammar and Composition	Peer Teaching	Readings and Discussions	Peer Teaching	Advanced Conversation

Problem:

Some students find entry into sequential courses difficult because they are inadequately prepared. This is due in part to insufficient coordination of materials and to staff members proceeding in independent ways in absence of common goals.

Strategy:

The problem could be greatly alleviated by improved managerial procedures such as:

. School districts should have a staff member knowledgeable of foreign language teaching responsible for coordinating the program at both the junior and senior level. This person would be responsible for establishing syllabi, developing curriculum, fostering better communication among members of the foreign language departments, and establishing common goals and objectives. It is important that younger members of the foreign language departments and junior high school teachers have imput into decision making.

. A democratic system must exist for choosing textbooks and materials, and when a decision is made by a majority of foreign language teachers in a particular language, then that text must be a district-side adoption. Texts must be chosen according to sequential difficulty and provide for an orderly transition through all levels.

. Uniformity must exist especially at the A and B level courses in the form of minimal levels of performance to ensure that students have had the same basic grammar and vocabulary. Minimal levels are those that all teachers at a given level can

reasonably be expected to achieve. There is nothing more discouragi or exasperating for students entering a sequential course to be expected to know material that has not been presented or repeat material that has already been learned. Uniformity does not mean that all teachers must engage in the same learning activities; there are many paths to a destination but the destination must be assured. Procedures must be put into effect as to what a student body at a given school can reasonably handle in the foreign languages and the critical point must be found where the subject will be reasonable and challenging at the same time. Dr. Frank Grittner, foreign language specialist in the Wisconsin Department of Education, expresses the opinion of many. He contends that foreign language teachers have moved in the direction of introducing too much content at too fast a rate by covering all the pages in the book between September and June. The challenge is to use textbooks as a basic resource rather than as basic curricula. We should remember that it is not the quantity of material covered but the quality of the student's experience that is important.

. The previous points may be summed up in one word that has much currency in educational circles today, "articulation". A description of effective articulation is found in the Foreign Languag Framework for California Public Schools: Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve:

> The first step in building or maintaining an articulated foreign language program is to ensure that teachers meet regularly and frequently to plan articulation. In general, there should be separate meetings for each language that should involve all teachers whose students proceed

> through a specific sequence. As the teachers discuss objectives, methodologies, approaches, learning activities, tests, textbooks, grading standards, and all other topics that are involved in the articulation, they will begin to know how their colleagues feel about the key aspects of foreign language education. This knowledge will have its effect in modifying each person's conviction. As discussion proceeds and the group members begin to see issues from the same point of view, formal decisions on specific segments of the program may be made.[1]

Problem:

Students view foreign languages as irrelevant, inconsequential and not related to their lives and hence avoid them. Before proceeding with strategy, foreign language teachers should be the first to dispell the notion that foreign languages have little value. Unfortunately, however, some have actually fallen victim to this notion. The truth of the matter is that foreign language is no more or less important than most subjects in the curriculum. Experience has shown us that education is cyclical and that every epoch has its "prestige" subjects that emerge as a result of national emergencies or the prodding of pressure groups, eventually to lose their importance to others. Beyond the schooling that provides the skills for existence, one might argue that all subjects are of equal importance until the day emerges when it shall be determined what a truly educated person is and what subjects are more important in preparing that person, a prospect that seems somewhat distant. The fact is that few persons who have been successful in foreign languages have claimed that they are irrelevant.

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[1] California State Department of Education Publication (Sacramento, California)

Admittedly, the importance of foreign language study is difficult to establish in a monolingual nation which has traditionally espoused the melting pot theory. However, the social climate is changing. Many urban and whole geographical areas of the United States are becoming bilingual and in some cases multilingual. In addition, the move nationally and internationally is toward cultural pluralism and preservation of ethnic characteristics. This in itself should provide incentives to learn the language/culture of ethnic groups represented in the United States as well as languages/cultures in general.

Strategies:

Students must be made aware that learning the language and culture of a particular country contributes to mind expansion, the understanding of one's native language, and the opening of new concepts and new ways of thinking and living that will help them understand their own values better. Emphasis in our schools today is on values clarification; indeed, what better way exists of defining one's own values than contrasting them with those of another culture? This activity can serve as an excellent springboard to discussions either in the foreign language in advanced courses or in English at the lower levels. Many foreign language teachers balk at allowing English to be spoken in the classroom, but since so many students drop the language after the second year, one of the more positive contributions we can make to a student's education is to destroy stereotypes, change existing attitudes and pinpoint the life styles and thinking of the target culture that can help in

clarifying the students' own values. H. Ned Seelye, a national leader in culture teaching comments, "the national attrition of 90 percent at the end of the second year of language study indicates that culture must be taught during the first two years of foreign language study. Only a fraction of our efforts to teach cultural understanding should be directed to upper-level courses."[2] Foreign language teachers can play a very important role in values clarification because of their knowledge of the target culture as well as their own. Some items that can serve as a basis for values analysis are:

1. Woman's role in the family and society.
2. Man's role in the family and society.
3. Children and adolescent's role in the family and society.
4. The family structure and the meaning of family.
5. Friendship-the outsider-the foreigner-How relationships are interwoven in the social fabric.
6. Urban and country life.
7. Festivals, feast days and national holidays - Their origin and significance in the national life.
8. Superstitions, folklore, myths and national heroes.
9. The educational system - The concept of education.
10. Geography, climate, customs, and language of the provinces or patria chica. Regional differences.
11. Class differences and prejudices. The role of minorities.
12. The concept of achievement and success.
13. The concept of leisure time.
14. "Watering holes" or Boites de nuit, el cafe and how they fit into the social fabric.
15. The role of the intelligensia.
16. National monuments.
17. The place of the arts.
18. The individual and society.
19. Sports
20. Youth, aging, and death
21. The concept of beauty.
22. Nature

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[2] H. Ned Seelye, Teaching Culture (Skokie: National Textbook Company, 1974)

In the contrasting process, the teacher is the informer while the student contrasts the American point of view. Seelye's text contains ways of presenting culture through "culture assimilators" which help students in thinking through cultural problems. A culture assimulator prepared by Genelle Morain can serve as a model for teachers preparing their own.

CULTURE ASSIMILATOR EPISODE 5: FRANCE
This episode was prepared by Genelle Morain.

As a young American tourist in Tours, France, you have been invited to dinner at the home of a French business associate of your father. You know that under such circumstances it is considered polite to bring a bouquet of flowers to the hostess. Accordingly, you arrive at the door of the apartment with a handsome bouquet of white chrysanthemums. As your hostess greets you, you offer the bouquet to her. You notice a look of surprise and distaste cross her countenance before she masters herself and accepts your offering graciously.

All evening you are haunted by the feeling that you have done something wrong. You would like to apologize-but you are at a loss to know what for.

What could explain your hostess' reaction?

A. A bouquet of chrysanthemums is considered an apology for a serious blunder in French culture.

B. A bouquet of chrysanthemums is considered a proposal of marriage in French culture.

C. Chrysanthemums are considered the flower of death in French culture.

D. The hostess was allergic to chrysanthemums.

You chose A. Although this symbolic use of flowers would be valid in some cultures, the French do not consider the chrysanthemum as a flower of apology.

You chose B. This would seem to be a logical possibility but in French culture the symbolism of the chrysanthemum is allied to an aspect of life other than romance. The French consider the rose the flower of love.

You chose C. Your choice is the correct one. The chrysanthemum is considered "la fleur de mort" because it is traditionally used in conjunction with funerals and interments in France.

You chose D. To the allergy-conscious American, this would seem a logical assumption. The French, however, are not so obsessed with allergies, preferring to blame most physical troubles on the liver.

[3]

Depending on the level of the class, the above example could be discussed in English or the target language. The effectiveness of the above technique resides in the fact that the students actually live the role in which a lack of understanding leads to cultural conflict. It provides them with a reference point to examine their own point of view. Seeyle goes on to discuss culture capsules and culture clusters which can be prepared by the students themselves. The discussion for the culture capsule revolves around bread and its significance in the French culture, while the culture cluster includes three culture capsules of a family meal (setting the table, table manners, and roles of the family at the table). Finally, a thirty minute simulation takes place in which students take family roles and actually set a table and perhaps even bake the bread.

[3] Taken from Seeyle's text, page 108.

This is an excellent exercise for learning vocabulary and using it in a concrete situation.

. Foreign language study cannot be meaningful to students unless points of contact with the target language and culture exist. Foreign travel, associations with inhabitants of the target language and speaking to visitors are some ways of accomplishing this end. Every effort must be made to provide students with opportunities for language and cultural experiences such as:

. Meeting visitors and exchange students from the target language. School districts can form consortiums to finance foreign students who will spend a portion of their time in each sponsoring school district of the consortium.

. Engaging in foreign travel programs. A word of caution is necessary here because mere sightseeing and dining in a few typical restaurants does not constitute a cultural experience that will change attitudes and be meaningful to the student. This can only be accomplished by interaction with people of the target country to learn their daily life patterns and values. Student trips to foreign lands should be planned with specific objectives and learning activities that will sound the language and culture of the target country and remove the student from the role of the tourist.

. Viewing audio-visual materials and realia from the target country. Although this is an experience that may be considered to be second-hand, it can be of great value if handled properly.

However, films or slides shown without comment and background information from the teacher are of doubtful value because cultural understanding is not guaranteed by merely viewing these materials. Students should be prompted with an overview of the film and a thorough introduction to the vocabulary, especially for elementary classes because the level of difficulty of most films is beyond that of the student. If the film is in the foreign language, a recapitulation in the target language is valuable; if in English, a resume can be made by the foreign language teacher in the target language. In addition, schools should provide a resource center or a corner in the classrooms where students can read or browse in periodicals of the target country.

. Visiting nearby available resource of educational value pertaining to the target culture with objectives and activities prepared by the teacher.

Problem:

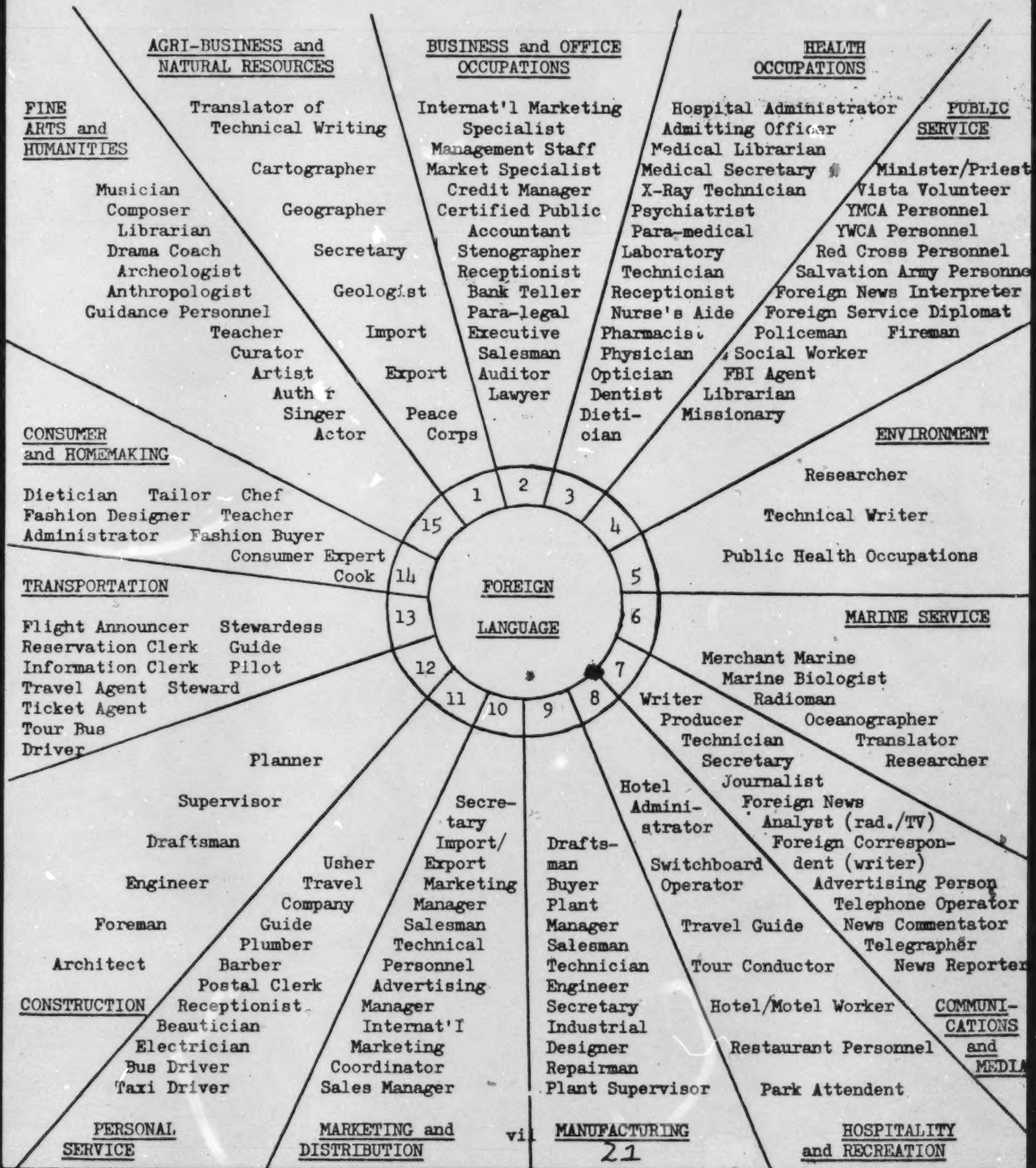
Many students have the notion that foreign languages are not useful in their careers. Teachers must incorporate into the foreign language curriculum activities that will make students aware of the value of a foreign language in their career.

Strategy:

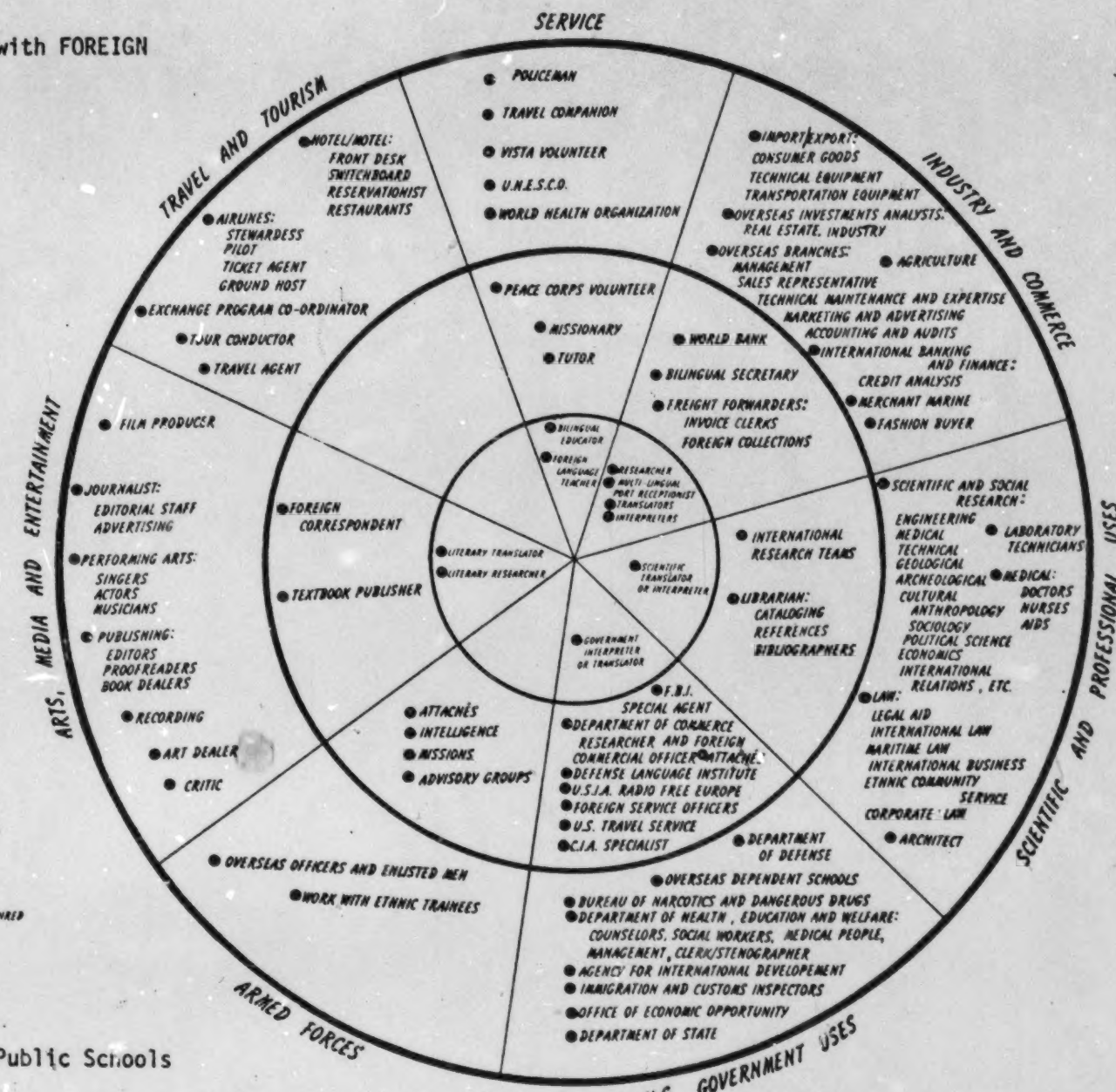
In order to demonstrate the practicality of foreign languages in career education, teachers should provide continuous activities through all levels of foreign language learning which focus on the usefulness of knowing a foreign language in certain careers. This

can include activities such as interviewing persons who use foreign language in their work, collecting want ads that advertise jobs requiring a knowledge of foreign languages (the New York Times want ads are a good source), researching occupations in career clusters, dramatizing situations in which foreign languages are needed (policemen, National Parks bilingual tour guides in important historical centers for the Bicentennial, social workers, etc.) inviting resource persons to speak on the use of foreign languages in their work, and conducting in depth research of several occupations where foreign languages are useful, including educational and work experience, working conditions, pay and promotions. In order not to delude students, it must be stressed that in most careers foreign language knowledge must be combined with a salable skill such as business, engineering, etc. Students must be warned that the more "romantic" careers such as simultaneous translator for the United Nations require a high level of proficiency and the competition is keen. Included here are examples where foreign languages are useful in careers.

Career Cluster Diagram



CAREER OPPORTUNITIES with FOREIGN LANGUAGES



LANGUAGE AS PRIMARY SKILL
- MUST HAVE TO GET JOB

LANGUAGE AS AUXILIARY SKILL
- HIGHLY USEFUL OR REQUIRED

LANGUAGE AS AUXILIARY SKILL
- USEFUL WITH OTHER SKILLS

CAM Project Highline Public Schools

Problem:

Foreign languages do not have the visibility they deserve and students often have unfounded attitudes that they are too difficult. In addition, the community and school board seldom are provided with an opportunity to see the results of the foreign language program.

Strategies:

. Most foreign language teachers have an evening in which a typical meal of the target country is prepared. Why not invite administrators, a few parents and members of the school board to join in the festivities?

. Most foreign language teachers have traveled to the target country. Why not invite parents and school board members to an evening meeting in which slides and cultural insights are presented? The program could be shared by two teachers.

. In conjunction with the music department, foreign language teachers can provide an evening of music and dance presented by all foreign language students to which the public is invited.

. Foreign language teachers should present programs to schools which feed students into their courses concerning activities in foreign language classes that would stimulate them to pursue a foreign language. Above all, stress the value of foreign language learning.

Conclusion:

The strategies discussed here are not intended to be a panacea but are points of departure to improve the teaching and learning of foreign languages. The ideas are not new; only the approach is different. We are only beginning to find ways of devising activities that will result in achieving our goals. For example, the teaching of culture has always been an item of top priority for foreign language teachers. However, the method of acculturating a student has been rather ineffectual. If our ultimate goals is to impart the knowledge that will change student attitudes and behaviors, then Seeyle and others have devised a method that will lead us along that road. Unfortunately, the attitude that too often prevails in the teaching profession is that "it can't be done." This type of attitude works against removing obstacles and implanting new methods and only assures that things will continue as they are. What is needed on the part of the teacher is good will; that is, a willingness to admit to a problem and a willingness to attempt solutions.